

Artist's Sojourn: Recent Works by Tan Nan See

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This essay is not *about* art. Rather, it is written *through* art. It is conceived on the ground of hermeneutic aesthetics, aiming “not to arrive at a concept of art but to deepen our experience of art” (Davey 2007). In so doing, it is concerned not so much with clarifying the artist’s intention as it is with opening up the cognitive and experiential possibilities offered by the artist and her works. It is concerned with coming to term with the force that materials and processes of art exert onto the artist and the viewer. By doing so, aesthetic experience is understood here as dialogical, implying that the art objects ‘speak back’ or ‘stare back’, where “an artwork acquires an ideality of possible meanings which cannot be obviated by any possible realization” (Gadamer quoted in Davey 2007). For this reason, experiencing an art work is framed as an unfolding of the ‘subject-matter’, where the subject-matter is no longer a given that is ‘uncovered’ by interpretation, but rather is the *effect* of (ongoing) interpretation. Since the artist him/herself is the subject in/of the work, the address of the artwork is also the fundamental emergence of the artist. Through such trajectory this essay asserts the process of art as a dialogical event where the artist is not simply the maker/author, and nor is the critic (thus the audience) as the distiller of meaning and authorial intention. Rather, it emphasizes the status of the artist and the critic as ones who are being discursively formed through the artwork. This means that artwork is understood in this essay as a function of a signature through which the artist and the critic are signed and textualized into existence.

The signature in question, through which Tan Nan See emerges as the artist and myself as the critic, is a collective of sculptural objects and two-dimensional works that gather under the banner *Artist's Sojourn*, forming Tan Nan See’s current solo exhibition at NN Gallery. The artworks feature a wide spectrum of unconventional mediums, ranging from painting and photography to everyday objects, such as food, embroideries and stitchings. The artist also refers

constantly to art historical sources. Nan See suggested that the diversity of mediums and art historical awareness inherent in her works are perhaps due to her training at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), where she spent her undergraduate years exploring four studio areas (painting, graphic design, printmaking, photography) without really specializing in any one of them. Later she briefly embarked on a postgraduate research on installation art (also at USM), during which she spent months in the libraries, collecting and archiving various textual data.¹ Subsequently, these experiences and routines as researcher are given artistic forms that incorporate the processes of researching textual sources. For example, in *Selamat Makan I* the artists replicates through drawing examples of artworks featured in art historical sources that use foodstuffs as their subject-matters. Such approach was already in effect in Nan See's previous work, where she reproduced selected masterpieces in Malaysian art history and presented them as a series of framed postcards.²

The sculptural objects in *Artist's Sojourn* are intended to enhance sensory experience by incorporating into the works routine gestures such as eating, reading and smelling. They demand from the audience participation at a very physical level, through the artist's conscious manipulation of the installation so that the viewers look up to the ceiling, or in other instances search for details with their very hands. Such interactivity is indeed driven by the desire to share³, epitomized in the collective partaking of a meal during the opening ceremony as a part of the work. Similarly, Nan See's decision to let us take the recipe books to read at home as an aspect of the exhibition projects her emphasis on the notion of art as a vehicle for sharing.

As indicated by the title of the exhibition, the pieces that form this exhibition stem from Nan See's own living experience, expressing a segment of the reality that is shared by most young contemporary artists, namely the drive to participate in artist residency programs as a means to sustain oneself and establish one's career. Nan See relays this reality through a series of

¹ Email correspondent with Tan Nan See, 16 March 2011.

² Entitled *Study of Malaysia Modern Visual Arts*, these series were first shown in 2006 Asia Art Biennale (Dhaka) and will be featured again this year in Bandung, in the exhibition *Tanah Ayer: Malaysian Stories from the Land*

³ In her exhibition brief, Nan See stressed that her solo exhibition is the occasion to share her experience with the audience.

metaphorical objects such as maps, keys and re-produced letters, all of which were integral to the nomadic routines of artist residency, physically reconstructed and crafted into objects, paintings and drawings. *Artist's Sojourn* culminates in a central installation entitled “*Selamat Artist Meal*” that centers around culinary theme, featuring food and recipes that the audience partakes and take home, respectively. The foregrounding of the culinary theme envisions the artist’s strategy to survive in the art world that is highly competitive. The artist’s wish for the fundamentals of living is signaled by her use of the Chinese proverbs “yi”, “shi”, “zhu” and “xing”, meaning cloth, food, home and travel. While travelling may seem a leisurely demand to most of us, but for today’s artists it has become an integral strategy of living, in search of artist residency programs around the world that would fund their career as well as their daily living for a few months. The sense of security and hope, however temporary, offered by artist residency programs and the lifestyles they engender is presented by coupling the aforementioned Chinese proverbs with corresponding Malay expressions: *Selamat Pakai* , *Selamat Makan*, *Selamat Duduk*, and *Selamat Kembara*, where the term *Selamat* expresses well wishes in relation to the wearing of the clothes, eating a meal, sitting down and travelling. Consequently, these linguistic elements work in tandem with the physicality of the art objects to persuade our sensory reaction and participation to intimate the ‘life’ of a contemporary artist.

The genesis of Nan See’s meal was the kitchen in Changdong artist residency (South Korea), which was shared by fourteen artists. Upon her return, Nan See began her ‘meal project’ through which “food and survival of the artist will merge together.”⁴ Indeed, her thoughts on the ‘artist’s survival’ are mapped onto her own personal existence, for she is concerned about the struggles that artists have been facing in sustaining themselves and about her own future.⁵ Therefore, sharing here is not simply a symbol of goodwill or reciprocal utopia. It actually submits a will and a wish for artistic and social agency in a system that demands personal competitiveness and sacrifices. The will for artistic agency that would work against the sacrificial logic of competition is gestured by the artist by incorporating elements from her actual life.

⁴ Conversation with Tan Nan See, 28 March 2011.

⁵ Email correspondent with Tan Nan See, 16 March 2011.

In other words, Nan See utilizes autobiography as a critical strategy to narrate and empower her existence as a specific socio-historical subject (i.e. a young contemporary Malaysian artist) who is subjected to certain institutional constraints and structure of power. After all, subjectivity and the stories of the self are integral components of the institutionalization of the individuals. We find narration and documentation of the self are essentially an institutional ritual, taking place in counseling sessions, at workplaces, medical offices and courts of laws. The countless official forms that all of us have filled throughout our lives are autobiographical acts that bind us to power, for they are institutional means of confessions, of rewards and accusations; it is a mechanism of legitimation, a source of authority and shame. By narrating her personal experiences through the larger network of the art world, Nan See's autobiographical gesture must not be reduced to a document of personal experiences. It is fundamentally a social act, a strategy for survival, a will for agency as an artist and a social subject. An artist's life is never about glorifying talents and geniuses. Subjectivity is born out of subjection (Foucault 1982), thus must be conceptualized as an instrument of `conscientization`, a tool to awaken critical consciousness towards the artist's own life and the lives of those around her.

References:

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- Foucault, Michel (1982). 'The Subject and Power' in H.L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow (eds.). *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics (Second Edition)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.